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More to it than Sugar

It's a strange day when Louisiana politicians oppose a trade treaty almost unanimously.

The United States bought Louisiana from Napoleon in large measure to preserve access to the port of New Orleans, and the importance of the port to Louisiana's economy has not diminished since. The state struggles to compete for new manufacturing plants, and in recent years energy companies have transferred jobs from New Orleans to Houston. But the port facilities along the lower Mississippi River are still among the busiest in the world.

Unfortunately, the importance of trade to this metro area and Louisiana as a whole has largely been forgotten in the debate over the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement.

The agreement would lower trade barriers that discourage U.S. firms from selling their products in Central America, and vice versa. So far, though, much of the discussion has focused on the effect of the treaty on the state's beleaguered sugar industry. While sugar lobbyists won some concessions, the treaty would still expose Louisiana producers to greater foreign competition, and the industry regards the treaty as a significant threat.

That's a major reason why all four major candidates for U.S. Senate oppose the treaty, as do most members of the state's congressional delegation. Only Rep. Jim McCrery has come out for it. Rep. William Jefferson -- usually a strong voice for free trade -- said he has yet to decide.

Looking out for the sugar industry can yield significant results at the ballot box. It's noteworthy that the industry is concentrated in southwestern Louisiana -- which is to say, in the area whose voters often decide statewide races. During a tough re-election battle two years ago, Sen. Mary Landrieu raised the possibility that President Bush would allow more foreign sugar into the United States and that her runoff opponent would go along with the idea. Many in political circles believe that the issue was the key to Sen. Landrieu's victory.

But however potent sugar is on the campaign trail, there are other industries in the state. Lowering trade barriers would enlarge the potential market for the state's rice, timber and poultry industries, among others.

Meanwhile, New Orleans, with its long-standing ties and relative proximity to Central America, is in a good position to gain shipping traffic -- and new jobs. If CAFTA fails, American manufacturers and retailers won't stop buying low-cost goods overseas. But the textiles they might have bought from Central and South America will come instead from Asia -- and will enter the United States through Los Angeles and Seattle instead of New Orleans. Louisiana can't afford to lose such traffic.

Decisions on trade treaties by our state's elected officials need to be based on a sober assessment of how such treaties affect all industries in Louisiana. At this point, opponents of CAFTA are doing a more effective job than proponents are of getting their views across.